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SUBJECT: Minsk Election Weekly XIII (March 11-March 17)

[¶1.](#) This is the thirteenth in a weekly series of election-oriented reports, providing brief items of interest related to the March 19 presidential elections.

Observers

[¶2.](#) OSCE PA and ODIHR Launch Short-Term Observer Mission

On March 16, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President Alcee Hastings, a U.S. Representative from Florida (D), arrived in Belarus to lead 126 delegates from 35 member states in the OSCE PA short-term presidential election observation mission. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) expects to field 440 short-term observers for the presidential elections. OSCE PA and OSCE/ODIHR plan to release a joint press statement on their assessment of the election process on March 20.

[¶3.](#) Swedish and Danish Observers Arrested, Thrown Out

On March 15, Belarusian authorities arrested eight members of a Scandinavian team of unofficial observers and ordered them to leave Belarus. The two Swedes, members of Sweden's Liberal Party, were arrested in Grodno after visiting a polling station and were banned from entering Belarus for five years. The six Danes, including members of the Social Democratic Youth of Denmark, were arrested in Minsk, questioned for four hours, and their computers were confiscated. Other members of the unaccredited observation team, sent by the Danish NGO Silba, were detained in Gomel, Grodno, Minsk, and Mogilyov. According to a Silba spokesperson, 40 Swedes and Danes were denied visas this week and the rest entered on tourist visas, thinking that it would be "perfectly legal" to observe the election.

[¶4.](#) Georgian MPs Detained at Airport

Eight MPs of the Georgian Parliament, who are accredited as observers of the OSCE PA, were detained on March 16 at the Minsk airport when they arrived on a flight from Vienna. Upon arrival, security services questioned the MPs about Georgia's alleged involvement in preparation of terrorist attacks during the election. The MPs' phones were disconnected and could not be reached. The Georgian consuls in Moscow and Kiev have left for Minsk to resolve the situation. Other Georgian MPs are reportedly in Minsk.

[¶5.](#) Belarus Has Right to Control Access to Foreigners

Spokesman for the MFA Andrei Popov on March 16 announced that

Belarus was using its right under the Vienna convention to "control access of foreigners to Belarus" to deny two Polish and one German ODIHR observers entry.

Repression and Harassment

16. Anonymous Tip Warns of Violence on Election Day

Independent online news source Belapan on March 14 received an anonymous e-mail supposedly sent by a police officer warning that Minsk authorities have called in 7,500 troops and all special task, rapid response units, police units to prevent opposition forces from gathering in the streets. The anonymous tip alleged that the police were issued 1000 Zarya-1 light and sound grenades, 700 Taifun, Cheryomukha and Siren grenades, 2,500 rubber bullet cartridges, and 200 Taifun-M gas grenades. The source claimed that troops would be concentrated in basements of the Palace of the Republic, the Trade Union's Palace of Culture, the Minsk Regional Executive Committee, and the Presidential Administration and snipers would be on rooftops. The source also claimed that special units would provoke demonstrators, possibly by exploding bombs to cause panic. The anonymous source said Interior Minister General Vladimir Naumov is in charge of the operation and General Prosecutor Petr Miklashevich sanctioned the use of weapons and physical force. On March 16, BKGB Chief Stepan Sukharenko told reporters that he knows the identity of the anonymous source and was prepared to "deal" with him.

17. Students Encouraged to Leave Capitol

According to news reports and Post contacts, university directors were instructed to cancel classes on March 17 and March 20, giving the students a four-day weekend during the election. Students have allegedly been "encouraged" to vote early and told to return to their homes outside of Minsk for the weekend. The rector at Belarusian State University reportedly warned students that they were to blame for whatever should happen to them should they decide to remain in the dormitories or in Minsk. He closed by reminding students about their high stipends, praising the quality of their lives and education, and reminded them "who these good things come from."

18. BKGB Suggests Possible Milinkevich Arrest After Elections

BKGB Chief Sukharenko told reporters on March 16 that the GOB would not press any charges against Milinkevich until after the elections. According to Sukharenko, Milinkevich would like to be arrested for a minor offense before the election, but Sukharenko asserted that this would not happen. Sukharenko later threatened terrorism charges and use of force against anyone who participates in demonstrations. Terrorism charges carry prison sentences up to 25 years, and in some cases, the death penalty. Sukharenko later commented that the BKGB does not interfere in the election process, but cannot allow a seizure of power by force. Milinkevich refuted Sukharenko's claims that the opposition was planning terrorist acts.

19. No Guarantee for Reporters' Safety

Interior Minister Vladimir Naumov on March 16 told reporters that he could not guarantee the safety of journalists at any demonstrations should they occur on March 19. He said he could only guarantee their safety should they remain in a "specially designated area." However, if journalists were to climb fences, run around, or provoke officers, then the journalists would not be safe.

10. Thousands of Campaign Ads Seized

Minsk police on March 16 seized 92,000 leaflets and printed campaign ads from nine opposition activists, who were subsequently detained and released. On the same day, police detained two activists and seized 40,000 leaflets from their vehicle.

11. Kozulin Activist Severely Beaten

A Grodno police lieutenant on March 14 severely beat Kozulin activist Nikolai Voron in a factory dormitory as he was passing out campaign flyers. According to a Kozulin spokesperson, the officer repeatedly slammed Voron's head against a wall. An ambulance rushed Voron to a hospital with serious head injuries.

12. Judge Drops Charges Against Kozulin Activists

A Minsk District Judge on March 13 dropped charges against four Kozulin activists for lack of evidence. Nikolai Tetyorkin, Sergey Kostylenko, Ivan Lobachev, and the candidate's brother Vladimir Kozulin were among 20 people who were apprehended on March 2 at the October police station after Kozulin was violently arrested at the Palace of Railroad Workers. All men were charged with hooliganism. The courts did not release Yuri Radivil, the activist driving the car involved in the March 2 shooting.

13. Workers Forced to Pro-Lukashenko Concert

According to independent online news source Belapan, the Svetlogorsk District Executive Committee on March 14 issued a directive to all Svetlogorsk enterprises ordering managers to force their employees to attend the March 15 concert at which Belarusian pop stars will support President Lukashenko. The directive required heads of companies to personally register the names of employees attending the concert at the Committee's office. Officials with the Committee declined to comment about the directive to journalists. According to a local Belarusian Popular Front (BNF) member, schoolchildren were ordered to buy state flags and most of the audience will be bused in from work.

14. Ukrainian Embassy Protests Arrests

The Ukrainian Embassy on March 15 contested the 10-day sentences given to five Ukrainian activists who were detained on March 12 following a Milinkevich rally. The Embassy filed an appeal with the Minsk City Court and phoned the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Martynov. On March 16, Ukrainian MPs publicly condemned Belarus' decision to deny entry to a Ukrainian Channel 5 news crew on March 14 and 15. The MPs said that Belarus' refusal to allow journalists to cover the elections and its violent apprehension of Ukrainian journalists on March 12 proves that Belarus' level of democracy falls short of OSCE standards.

15. BPF Denies Involvement in Fake Newspapers

Deputy chairman of the BPF Aleksandr Mikhalevich on March 14 denied that his party was responsible for publishing a fake issue of the state-run newspaper Sovetskaya Belarus. According to Mikhalevich, the issue was published by a group called "Khopits" [Enough] and he was only accompanying the 65,000 copies when they were seized by police in Mstislavl. The fake issue strongly resembled Sovetskaya Belarus with articles allegedly written by the paper's real staff that glorified Lukashenko in a "grotesque" manner. Editor-in-chief of Sovetskaya Belarus Pavel Yakubovich said the incident showed the morality of the opposition's tricks, but he would not sue Mikhalevich because it would be "below him."

Information

16. Independent TV Transmission Stops

On March 16, the Belarusian-British joint venture cable television company Kosmos TV stopped transmitting Russia's RTVi channel to 57,000 Belarusian subscribers citing technical problems. RTVi, a private Russian-language TV network, on March 5 launched a 30-minute show called Window to Europe as part of the EU's EUR 2 million program to increase independent

information access in Belarus. Window to Europe had planned to broadcast reporting on the Belarusian presidential elections in the days leading up to the vote. Mikhail Borshevsky, director of RTVi, told RFE/RL that this move was politically motivated, "Belarus' largest cable operator phoned us yesterday to say that they received an order from a high authority to cut off transmission during the election."

¶17. 200,000 Newspapers Seized

On March 17, police seized nearly the entire print run of 200,000 opposition *Tovarishch* newspapers. This special edition had been printed in Moscow and included Milinkevich's campaign program. Milinkevich's press spokesman announced that just 6,000 to 7,000 copies had been distributed before police seized the rest as they were being unloaded from a truck.

The Central Election Committee

¶18. Nine Percent of Voters Already Cast Ballot

Central Election Committee (CEC) Secretary Nikolai Lozovik on March 15, the first day of early voting, announced that three percent of eligible voters had already cast their ballots. By the end of the third day of voting, Lozovik announced that nine percent of the electorate had voted.

The Candidates

¶19. Lukashenko Calls Opposition Neo-Fascists

During a March 10 visit to the Belaruskaly potash fertilizer mine, Lukashenko called Milinkevich a representative of "ultra-nationalist," pro-Nazi nationalist forces and accused Kozulin of having criminal links. Spokesman for Milinkevich Sergey Voznyak dismissed the remark and quoted Lukashenko from a past interview with a German newspaper in which the President praised Hitler for his practices during the 1930s.

¶20. Lukashenko Refutes Remarks About His Sons, Wealth

In a March 11 interview on Russia's NTV channel, Lukashenko denied the opposition candidates' allegations that he and his sons had amassed a fortune through illegal arms sales. Lukashenko said that he had "destroyed" his sons because they have nothing, not even freedom and claimed that no one has heard of scandals involving his children. According to Lukashenko, his sons are taking the same path that he did, beginning with school, college, and army service in an elite unit. Lukashenko accused the opposition of relying on foreign funding and profiting from politics and said that they can "shoot each other to death, as was the case with these 'kidnapped' who disappeared," referring to his opponents who disappeared in 1999 and 2000.

¶21. Milinkevich Speaks to 5,000 in Gomel

According to independent press figures, 5,000 voters on March 13 in a Gomel soccer stadium gathered to listen to Milinkevich. [Note: the Milinkevich team estimates 6,000 people attended the rally.] Milinkevich outlined his election platform and called the presidential race a "serious struggle between the past and the future." He called it a disgrace that Lukashenko was not welcome in Europe. The candidate answered questions about economic reform, land ownership, investment, education, and labor rights. Milinkevich lambasted the authorities for the arrests and detentions of several political activists.

¶22. Minsk Gives Permission for Milinkevich Concert

On March 15, the Minsk City Executive Committee gave Milinkevich permission to hold a rock concert and rally in Nations' Friendship Park on March 18 in Bangalore Park. Banned

rock bands such as N.R.M., Neuro Dubel, and IQ-48 are scheduled to perform.

123. Kozulin Blasts Supreme Court Chairman

Kozulin on March 14 complained to the chairman of the Supreme Court Valentin Sukalo about the Supreme Court's refusal to reply to any of the opposition's formal complaints. According to Kozulin, Sukalo has "no right" to dodge meetings with presidential candidates and regarded his refusal to meet with Kozulin as an evasion of official duties. Kozulin described the current events in Belarus as a "constitutional coup" and insisted that Sukalo meet with him within the next two days. As of March 16, such a meeting has not taken place.

Quote of the Week

124. Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration Natalya Petkevich on March 15 on the possible withdrawal of opposition candidates from the election race:

"[Their withdrawal] would be an act of human cowardice" and would be prompted by the realization that "they stand no chance of victory."

According to Petkevich, the street demonstrations were the opposition's "only chance to work off money provided by Western countries. But I [Petkevich] am sure that law-enforcement agencies will take adequate measures."

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